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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/19/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: CIVIL SOCIETY DEMAND A VOICE IN
ELECTORAL REFORM DEBATE

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sision for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) While the Lebanese leaders meet in Doha to discuss political issues, including electoral reform, Lebanese civil society organizations feel left out and ignored. Many of them, who have been working on these issues since 2005, are disgusted with reports that Doha talks have been focused only on the Beirut redistricting issues. "Both sides are just trying to 'game' the districts to their own advantage." Administrative reform issues, which will actually have a much greater impact on the democratic process in Lebanon, are being ignored by both March 14 and March 8. Most recent press reports indicate that the leaders have postponed final decisions on the electoral law. Civil society groups have developed a strategic plan to demand a voice in future Beirut-based discussions. End Summary.

2. (C) On May 19, Special Assistant spoke with a variety of civil society groups working on electoral reform. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems currently serves as USG-funded independent, international electoral expert advisors. The Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform (CCER) is a consortium of 65 Lebanese NGO's working on electoral reform. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) recently funded an "executive secretariat" for CCER to improve strategic communications and coordination among its diverse members. The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) is an independent Lebanese NGO which is seen as one of the civil society leaders in this field. LADE receives no direct USG financial assistance, but is a member of CCER.

"Off to Doha Without Us"

3. (C) As the violence faded in Beirut and political leaders made plans to travel to Doha, the Arab League delegation announced that electoral reform would be one of the key agenda items. On May 15 - 16, CCER staff and volunteers worked through the night to lobby political leaders on both sides of the spectrum to consider a variety of administrative reforms, including:

- an independent electoral commission
- campaign finance reform
- campaign media regulation
- lowered voting age to 18 from 21

-- voting privileges for Lebanese citizens living abroad
-- polling station access for voters with special needs

14. (C) CCER representatives reported little to no response on their advocacy efforts with both political blocs. Amine Gemayal (March 14) and Michel Aoun (March 8) also told the Charge on May 15 that civil society would have no role in Doha. Gemayal confirmed that civil society had not been invited, but later admitted that perhaps it should be included in follow-up discussions in Beirut. Aoun was more dismissive, saying the Doha table was already too crowded. CCER contacts tell us that Aoun also privately tells them that civil society has no role in the debate, but he refuses to go on record with these sentiments.

15. (C) We had been told over the weekend that IFES had been invited to Doha by Samir Geagea. A/DCM spoke with Elie Khoury, the Lebanese Forces (LF) international advisor, who knew of no such invitation. As it turns out, a lower level LF party member issued an invite to a Lebanese staff member at IFES, who was then dispatched to Doha on May 17. IFES was never admitted into any of the committee meetings, nor was it allowed to play a meaningful advisory role. CCER, which had been surprised to learn that an "international" group like IFES had been invited, confirmed that this was a "false alarm" and not a sign that civil society voices would be heard.

Revised Action Plan

16. (C) As the Doha meetings proceed, civil society members have revised their action plan. A media blitz began on May 17 and CCER member interviews were printed in three major local newspapers: An Nahar, Al Hayat and L'Oreint Le Jour. They are booked to appear on a number of televised Lebanese talk shows on May 19. CCER also plans to reach out to "the MP's who were also left behind" in order to shape committee consideration of the various proposals. Finally, LADE plans to engage in a major effort to build grassroots support for electoral reform "which will benefit all of Lebanon, not just the 'zaim' or hereditary leaders."

Civil Society Frustrated and Anger Builds

17. (C) There is a note of frustration and anger present on May 19 which had been lacking in early discussions. All political leaders are being criticized, regardless of party. When asked if they truly place March 14 in the same category as March 8, a number of contacts said they actually assign more blame to March 14. "Hizballah never promised us a democracy, but March 14 has broken the 'covenant' of the Cedar Revolution. It is the 'international darling' of democracy, but it has never actually acted like one." Here are some other statements shared with Special Assistant on May 19:

-- "March 14 may try to win the current battle, but without civil society engagement and public support, they are going to lose the war."

-- "If the leaders don't show us respect now (i.e. agreeing to meet), I assure you we won't show them respect at the next ballot box."

-- "Why do international donors, including the U.S., continue to fund civil society initiatives while simultaneously supporting leaders who ignore us?"

Comment

18. (C) Once again, March 14 seems to be losing the strategic communications war, even among the staunchest defenders of democracy in Lebanon. We have heard March 14 contacts say, "There are too many civil society groups working on electoral reform. We don't have time to meet with them all." March 14

contacts might benefit from a basic lesson from Poli Sci 101 -- you have to listen to your constituents and not just one or two of them. Even if party leaders are busy, a lower-level staff dialogue would satisfy the civil society leaders, who are angered by the continued dismissal of their efforts. If some kind of backroom deal is struck on electoral reform, the long-term negative consequences (i.e., results in the 2009 parliamentary election) will likely outweigh any immediate benefits. End comment.

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